



## PARENT ALLY

Another one of the teacher's roles is as a parent ally. Both the teacher and a student's parents have a common goal — the well-being of the student. Parents want to see their child involved in a secure, dynamic, nurturing, and educationally progressive program. They want regular information about what their child is doing and how she/he is progressing. However, forming an alliance with parents involves more than telling them how their students are doing in school. Most parents also have needs like these:

- to feel welcome and respected, whatever their race, religion, sexual orientation, income level, education, abilities, or marital status

- to have access to information about the program and about the Montessori approach
- to feel that their skills and interests are valued

Communicating in a way that honors parents' needs is simply good business. If parents feel that they are welcomed into their child's program and are given opportunities to express thoughts and concerns, they will in turn feel positive about the program and readily recommend it to other parents.

A program that treats parents as valuable partners in the educating of their students has three main focuses:

- acting as a resource for parents
- acknowledging parents as resources
- facilitating special events

### Acting as a resource for parents

Parents have many reasons for enrolling their child in a Montessori program. They might simply want good care for their child, or they might believe that a Montessori program represents the best way of preparing their child for life. Parents who are informed about the Montessori method can better understand and support what their child is doing in the program. The teacher can act as a resource for parents in a range of ways:

- posting and distributing a mission statement
- holding an orientation night

- providing an orientation package and handouts
- giving a positive message in the first weeks
- staying in touch throughout the year
- offering workshops



Many parents are fully aware of the benefits of a Montessori program and are knowledgeable about the Montessori method. However, it is important for the teacher to realize that not all parents have this kind of knowledge. Parents consider many different factors when they enroll their student in a program. Some parents have little understanding of the Montessori method and may have simply chosen a school because it is close to home, or because a friend's child attends. Other parents have heard something positive

about the Montessori method and feel that it might benefit their child.

Whatever the parents' level of knowledge, many teachers have found it helpful to post a framed mission statement on a prominent wall of the classroom and give photocopies to new and prospective parents. The mission statement summarizes what makes a particular Montessori program unique — the program's understanding of the Montessori method, the program's main goals, and how the program works to achieve these goals. Approaches vary from one Montessori program to another. It is important that a mission statement shows respect for each program's right to achieve their goals differently. Mission statements that criticize other schools or approaches are self-defeating and destructive for all Montessorians. It is useful to read what other schools have deemed important to include in their own unique mission statements. To read a sampling of mission statements, teachers can simply conduct an internet search: Montessori Mission Statements.

Having a mission statement and following it gives direction to everything a program does and can also protect the teacher in the event of legal problems or a misunderstanding with a parent. A posted mission statement can stand as a daily reminder to everyone about what the program stands for. For example, Kushun in her program's mission statement describes the program's approach on presentations:

In this program, presentations:

- are most often given to a small group
- are short (usually 20–30 minutes)
- are geared to students' needs, interests, and abilities
- end with an action freely chosen by each student
- involve traditional Montessori materials as often as possible
- are given during two daily work periods ideally lasting 3 hours

Some programs offer an orientation night when parents with children entering a program for the first time are invited before the start of the school year to come in for an hour or two without their children to meet the teacher, see the classroom, and learn a bit about the program. For example, Kushun gives the parents a tour of the classroom and outdoor area, briefly outlines the program, and distributes some information sheets. Then she answers any general questions the parents have. The evening ends with a social time so that the parents have an opportunity to meet each other.

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At an orientation night or upon enrollment, many programs provide parents with an information package containing specific details about the program and its ways of doing things. The package can include information like this:

### **HISTORY, STAFF, AND HOURS**

- brief history of the program
- teacher’s name, phone number, and hours available
- times the students’ day at school starts and ends

### **PROCEDURES**

- emergency procedures (e.g., if the student gets sick or has an accident at school)
- notification about the school closing in an emergency (e.g., listen to radio and television stations, set up a parents’ telephone tree)

### **REGULATIONS**

- visitor parking

- where to pick students up
- what to do if a parent has to be late picking up a student
- who is authorized to pick up a student

## STUDENTS' SUPPLIES AND CLOTHING

- suggestions for suitable clothing
- location of the lost-and-found

## GUIDELINES

- procedures for field trips, including average cost, permission slips required, and the role of parent volunteers
- expectations about students' attendance
- information for parents who can volunteer
- policy on snacks sent from home (many programs specify low-sugar, low-fat snacks, and some programs specify that snacks not contain nuts)
- policy on invitations to birthdays and other celebrations (many programs do not allow students to hand out invitations to parties during school hours)

In addition to an information package, a program might also provide information sheets that parents can take home and read as often as they wish. An information sheet can give parents information about topics unique to a Montessori program. For example, Kushun distributes a short biography of Maria Montessori and a sheet summarizing the rules for safety, order, and courtesy that everyone in the class will be expected to follow.

## Information for parents

An important responsibility for the teacher is preparing information for parents. Each program will differ in what the parents need. In preparing information about the Montessori method or about typical routines in Montessori classrooms, the teacher can refer to many resources, including this guide and the resources listed at the end of the guide.

Parents are always grateful to hear how their child is progressing. Receiving regular information about their child makes parents more relaxed and supportive of the program, and potential anxiety over certain issues is usually easily managed, resulting in a positive outcome for all. There are several ways the teacher can stay in touch with parents throughout the year. Phone calls are one way:

- Schedule routine phone calls so that parents do not receive calls only when there is a problem with their child.
- Keep the phone call positive. If there is anything negative to discuss, schedule an in-person meeting.

Another way of staying in touch involves scheduling parent-teacher conferences during the year. These can be both informal and formal and can be requested by the teacher or by the parents. For example, when Shane's behavior is consistently disruptive in class, Kushun requests a strategy meeting with his parents. And when Marina's parents find out that she has



a disability, they call Kushun and request a meeting to discuss how best to accommodate Marina's special needs.

Many teachers schedule two formal parent-teacher conferences in the year — one a few months after the school year starts and another in February or March. These conferences are times for the teacher to review each student's progress with the student's parents. As discussed earlier in this guide, the teacher usually prepares a progress report and may show the parents examples of the student's work. The teacher also answers any questions the parents have about the school or their child. To accommodate working parents, most programs offer daytime and evening conference times. A session of 15–20 minutes is usually sufficient. The teacher will usually need to add about 5 minutes after each conference to make written notes about concerns or issues discussed.

Parents do not have to wait until there are problems or formal conferences before visiting the Montessori classroom. In most programs, parents may request an observation at any time. Observations can provide a positive insight into the student's life at school, which parents might not otherwise receive. By observing, parents can see how the teacher works with the student and might learn new strategies for dealing with their child at home. Parents can also be invited to borrow material such as Montessori magazines and books. Most Montessori programs also schedule two observation times for parents during the year — again, one in the first months of the school year and another in the last months. Generally, these observations last about half an hour. Observing parents join the class at the beginning so that there is less interruption to the students' routine. Parents are asked to sit down and observe unobtrusively.

Weekly bulletins, newsletters, annual reports, and websites represent other ways the teacher can stay in touch with parents throughout the year:

- A one- or two-page monthly bulletin can give parents quick information about events in the program and in the outside community.
- A newsletter published every month or two can contain information about upcoming events, summarize articles of interest about the Montessori method, list resources parents can access on various topics, highlight recent research on children, provide reviews of children's films and books, and so on. The goal is to make the content interesting, informative, and attractive, not make the newsletter a vehicle for complaints and do's and don'ts.
- An annual report distributed at the end of the year can summarize the major events in the past school year and outline plans for the next.
- A website can offer information about the program and provide parents with links to more information about topics of all kinds.

Few parents are aware of how enriched the Montessori curriculum is or of the underlying philosophy behind it. Most programs offer workshops throughout the year to raise the parents' level of awareness and provide basic information. The first workshop, which often takes place about a month after the school year starts, gives the teacher an opportunity to provide basic information about the Montessori method and answer parents' questions about

activities in the classroom. The teacher can display materials and give a brief demonstration of their use and purpose. Since most parents welcome the opportunity to get together in a social setting and discuss issues of common interest with each other, the teacher needs to allow time for coffee and chatting after the workshop. Parents who ask questions specific to their child can be invited to schedule a meeting with the teacher.

Each workshop can cover two or three topics. The goal is to give parents an overview of the program's approach to learning and allow some time for questions. Topics covered throughout the year might include the following:

- a description of the Montessori method
- a plain-language summary of common Montessori terms
- advanced practical life activities
- language arts activities
- mathematics activities
- geography and history activities
- science activities and experiments
- art and music activities
- peace and cosmic education
- manners and courtesy (the social graces)
- presentations
- work periods
- policy on homework